

## Saving Grace

*Reviving a childhood dream and restoring my soul aboard the Schooner Grace Bailey*



Let's say it was a difficult summer. That my emotional state was fragile, at best. That I was—suddenly, it seemed—staring an imminent empty nest in the face. Our daughter was a high school junior, and our 18-year-old firstborn had just flown—8500 miles across the ocean, with a backpack and three surfboards, on a months-long solo trip to Indonesia. He's adventurous and free-spirited. I admire that so much, and I'm so proud of him. But to say I was undone by his leaving does not begin to tell it. I didn't want to be the clingy mom, or the person that has an identity crisis when the kids leave, but there you have it.

For days, I went alone to my favorite beach near our home in southern California, and sat squinting out at the horizon, trying to astral project, cast my spirit across fathoms and nautical miles to watch over him. I poured an ocean of fearful, lonesome, mother-tears into the ocean between us, wondering how I'd pass the weeks without shrivelling in anxiety.

Not long after he left, an old friend texted me. "I think you guys should come sailing with me on the Schooner Grace Bailey. You will love windjamming."

I'd sailed a bit as a kid. My dad had a Sunfish at my grandparents' summer home on Lake Erie, and later, a Bayfield called *Pilgrim*, a 25-foot sloop with a full keel, (full disclosure: I texted him to remind me; I'm still not exactly sure what it means). When his grueling attorney-legislator schedule allowed, he took our family out on weekend afternoon adventures.

I remember the kelp and petrol smell of the marina, the mildewy must of the upholstered cushions below deck, the painstakingly oiled teak wood trim. I

loved our squeeze-cheese and cracker picnics; reading till I drifted, wave-rocked, into dizzy, dreamy, sun-drenched half-sleep. I loved sitting alone at the prow, letting the Great Lakes wind whip my hair, hoping I looked as *Nereid* as I felt. I loved the *idea* of sailing, what it seemed to signify. I doodled sailboats in math class; dressed like I thought a carefree and cool sailor girl would, in Topsiders and my dad's baggy fisherman knit sweaters.

But by mid-high school, *cool and carefree* meant other things to me. As my weekends filled with friends, football games, and play rehearsals, those boat outings with my parents and little sisters slipped down my list of priorities.

Of course, now I understand how my folks felt when I outgrew the family trips aboard *Pilgrim*, what it took to let me go.

Anyway—several impossible factors need to fall into place in very short order to make this welcome windjamming distraction happen. But let's concede that they do, and that we are shortly on a plane to Maine.



I have no idea what to expect or what to pack. I bring books to read; pens, notebooks to fill. Do I avail myself of some nautical stripes, a hastily thrifted fisherman's knit, and some vintage khakis? You bet your boat shoes I do. Do I know if this is what a savvy and self-respecting seafarer would wear? I do not. I think it gives a certain Katherine Hepburn, *My, she was yar vibe*, so I lean in.

We arrive in Rockland on a pristine August afternoon, wander around, find some good coffee, and make our way down to the dock. I'm gobsmacked by the gleaming wooden beauty of the schooner and can't stop taking pictures—fully knowing that they will not do her justice. How do you capture something that feels at once majestic and intimate, luxurious and rustic, heavy with history and yet so present, fleet, ready? I've had this feeling standing near a thoroughbred.



Early that evening, the erudite, charismatic Captain Sam welcomes us aboard with an oral history of the Grace Bailey and things to know about our upcoming trip. We are in excellent hands.



We meet the other guests; a wonderfully eclectic group. There's a teacher, a nurse, several artists, a lawyer, a stone mason, and more; parents, grandparents, a few kids; ages 12-75. One couple, in particular, feels instantly like dear old friends, like we knew each other in a past life.

We can't wait to set sail in the morning. We leave the boat to get dinner at a nearby restaurant, then return for the night. Stars are out, lamps are lit. One of the guests is already in a sound sleep on the deck, where he stays till dawn.

I'm nervous about two things: 1) That I'll remain preoccupied with worry about our son and won't be able to let go and enjoy myself, and 2) that being in my hot flash era, I may get claustrophobic in the gorgeously appointed but small berth; in any case, I love the idea of spending the night on deck if I need air and space. (For the record: slept like a baby in that berth).

In the morning, we wake to the smell of coffee and fresh baked scones; a busy, happy clatter from the galley.



After breakfast, a bunch of us dart into town for wine, whiskey, extra sunscreen. And then we're off.

From there, I confess, it's a beautiful blur. Or, not a blur exactly. An assemblage of crystalline moments, snapshots, mini-movie memories that dangle, separate yet together, sparkling, as if from a chandelier. I find I cannot hitch them to a timeline, make them hew to a narrative...

We are on the ocean, out of time, in a world apart. We're aboard for eons, light years—like summer camp as a kid when you lived a whole lifetime in one week: when *this place, these friends, that feeling* are everything.

There's a geometry of ropes—parallels and triangles ascending to the clouds, drapes and coils, Fibonacci-esque spirals, knots. The black iron, twisted-spindle, wood-handled helm, pie-slice symmetry inside the circle. Sun on the water, the glow of lanterns. There's a map spread out, held down with a pair of gloves, a coffee cup, and a shell. There's the smack and flutter of sails, the purr of Fiji the cat, asleep on deck, curled around Captain Sam's frayed straw hat. Blue sky, red bell, white pitcher of coral and yellow flowers, a bright hammock of fruit seen through a lens of dew on the galley window. The lavender scent and soft

squish of handmade soap in a silk pouch on our little sink with the brass fixture. A tiny vase of purple statice hanging above the bed. Creamy walls, visible wood grain.

Breakfast in the galley: stacks of pancakes, steaming coffee, sizzling bacon. Lunch, happy hour, dinner on the deck... I am without words, except *Damn, the food is good.*



We talk in pairs and groups, and go deep fast. People tell stories. Someone is navigating heartbreak. Someone has survived cancer. Some discover they share a complicated religious background that they are still unpacking. Someone is pivoting, figuring out the next step. Someone keeps to themselves, holes up most of the time. Someone is having a birthday. Someone is worrying about a son all the way across the world.

We're quickly familiar, testing the waters of joking and ribbing each other. We laugh a lot— especially the night we play games in the galley and a shy young girl comes hilariously out of her shell in a cheeky word game.

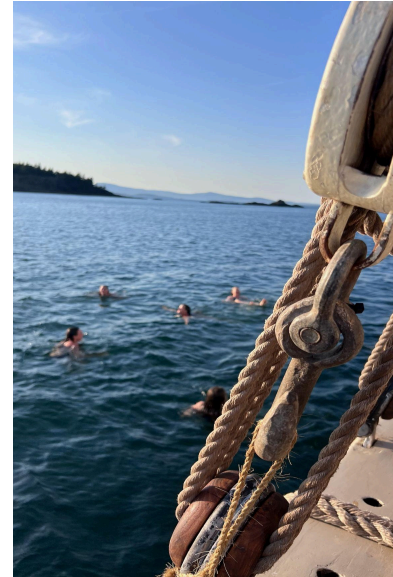
Seals and porpoises pop up to say hello. A bald eagle soars overhead.

I do no writing. Sometimes I open a book, but it's nothing compared to the view.

One moment we seem to be just drifting *la-di-da* among picturesque islets, another we are flying, laughing, gasping. It is peaceful and thrilling. When do I realize I'm not aching and fretting about our son anymore? The crew, some just a few years older than he, are charming and smart; some are quiet, some chatty; they're all industrious, capable, dedicated, great at what they do. They're out here on the ocean, living their own adventures, and versions of freedom; happy, thriving. This calms me.

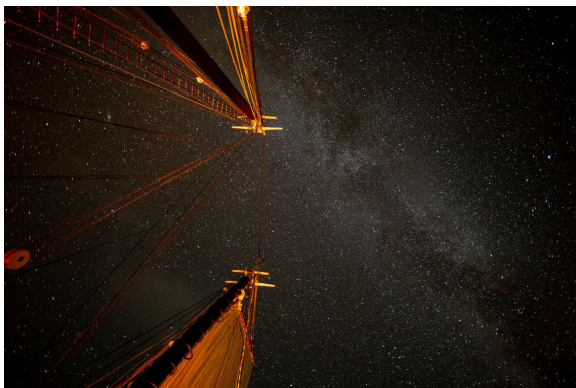
I am, in fact, radically relaxed. I've gone jellyfish. Other than helping hoist the sails, I do glorious nothing most of the time but sip coffee, water, wine, stare at the water, marvel at the scenery, look for shapes in the clouds...and I'm exhausted by nightfall. Salt air makes me sleepy.

There's a night my husband and I bring sleeping bags to the deck and stay out till the wee hours under a visible swath of Milky Way. Dew settles on us as we watch and doze, but we don't want to miss the sky. From the shadows comes a comforting murmur of other voices, people chatting into the night.



There is—and I mean this in the best way—no privacy on deck. It's a lot of being alone together. People carve out nooks for reading, chatting, gazing, napping. My husband finds a guitar and a perch to practice on.

When I decide, one afternoon, that I really ought to move around, stretch, get some exercise, I find a small open space on deck to practice yoga. I love to balance in wavery, unsteady places, let the shapes of my environment inform my flow: *triangle*, *twist*, *crescent*, *star*, *eagle*, *tree*. After a time, I realize one of my new friends is standing beside me.



"That looks like fun," she says. "But I wouldn't ask you to lead a class on your vacation." "But if I offered, would you want to?"

"I think a bunch of us would want to."

"Are you kidding? That's my happy place. Let's do it." And soon we have seven or eight *peaceful warriors* moving, breathing, saluting the sun aboard the Grace Bailey.

There's the day we find a small, deserted island and go ashore for a lobster bake. We wade in tide pools and tend the fire pit. Butter runs down our arms, and corn on the cob sticks in our teeth.

One morning, and another evening at sunset, Captain Sam opens the "pool" so hearty souls can leap off the side of the boat and plunge into the exhilarating late-summer ocean.

Time stretches and compresses. I take 319 pictures. At some point, my husband says, "This is the vacation we didn't know we needed."

Back in port—four days (was it?) later—we all hug goodbye. Some of us will see each other again in a matter of weeks. Several will touch base from time to time on the socials or over text. Some of us instant-old-friends will even partner on a new creative venture—an idea hatched aboard the Schooner Grace Bailey.

And yes, our son will indeed return safe and sound, a full-grown man, his free spirit home to stay for a while; and I will sob all over him, and then we'll spend hours exchanging animated stories of our ocean adventures and how they were exactly what we needed.

While I was still in high school, my dad's Sunfish was badly damaged in one of Lake Erie's epic storms. The Bayfield was sold a few years later, along with my grandparents' summer home.

Before we've even left Maine, I text my parents. "You guys," I say, "I think we should all go sailing on the Schooner Grace Bailey. You will love windjamming."

- Jenny Sheffer Stevens

